THE IMPERIALIST AGAINST IMPERIALISM

A Critical Reassessment of Noam Chomsky

Richard Preschel (2026)

An Essay in Four Parts

« On déteste ce qui nous est semblable, et nos propres défauts vus du dehors nous exaspèrent. »
(We typically detest what is akin to ourselves, and our own flaws, when witnessed from without, exasperate us.)

— Marcel Proust, La Prisonnière

"Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye."

— Matthew 7:5

A Personal Note

The critique assembled in this essay began in a university library, with a book I was no looking for. In 1979, during my year at a Parisian school of psychology, I happened to notice Skinner's ***Verbal Behavior*** *on a shelf. My first reaction was amusement: here was a man who made experiments with rats and pigeons and had the audacity to write a book about language. I opened it looking for laughs. I was immediately seduced — by the clarity, by the style, by the quality of attention Skinner brought to a subject that the reigning tradition treated as too complex for clarity. It took twenty years to write, Skinner says in that preface, and the twenty years are visible on every page: not as accumulated obscurity but as accumulated precision.*

Verbal Behavior changed my life. It showed me that clarity, reason, and genuine science are possible in the study of human behavior — that these were not naïve ambitions but the only honest ones.

The book was invisible in the most practical sense. There was no French translation — there still is none. In a Parisian university in 1979, a book that existed only in English was, for all practical purposes, not a book. I was the only student in my cohort with sufficient English to read it. The Chomskyan consensus did not need to actively suppress Verbal Behavior in France; the absence of a translation accomplished the same result passively and completely. (A Spanish translation would appear in the 1980s, from a niche Mexican press that published books for behaviorists). I found it because I could. The others could not have found it even if they had wanted to.

I should say something about the intellectual path that led me to that library. I had come to France for Lacan. Jacques Lacan was the reason I chose Paris over London — had I gone to London, I would have gone to the Tavistock Clinic and studied with Wilfred Bion. I did not arrive at Lacanian psychoanalysis naïvely: I had already mastered Bion, which had given me a calibrated tolerance for fuzziness and lack of clarity that I would not otherwise have had. Bion was genuinely trying to think about hard things — what happens in the space between two minds, how thinking itself becomes possible or impossible — and his complicated style reflects both the lack of clarity of his thoughts and the genuine fuzziness of the problems he was trying to solve. His difficulty is real, if not always earned. It gave him an aura of genius working. But it was honest difficulty, and learning to navigate it gave me a measure for what legitimate intellectual struggle looks like.

Lacan was something else entirely. A year of his seminars and his prose produced in me zero knowledge and zero acquirable skills — not because the subject was too hard but because the obscurity was the product. Where Bion was fuzzy because the problems resisted, Lacan was obscure because obscurity served his purposes: it generated disciples, foreclosed refutation, and transformed incomprehension into a sign of initiation rather than a sign of failure. He mistreated the French language as he mistreated everybody else — and in France, where the language is or was a religion, this was a confidence trick of considerable audacity. The silver lining was real: Lacan gave me French, gave me France, gave me a culture I have since made my own. I am now a French citizen. For that, at least, I owe him something.

But the intellectual debt runs the other way. It was precisely because I had been trained in genuine difficulty — Bion — and then exposed to performed difficulty — Lacan — that Skinner's Verbal Behavior landed with the force it did. Here was a man writing about something comparably difficult — human language, human thought, the relation between behavior and meaning — with complete lucidity and without any aura-generating machinery whatsoever. No neologisms deployed as weapons. No sentences that refuse to close. No cult of the master. Just a serious person attending carefully to a serious subject and saying, with precision, what he had found. After a year of Lacan in Paris, that was not a small thing. It was a demonstration that another kind of thought was possible.

I began to say so — to raise questions, in the school of psychology, about the theoretical foundations of Chomsky's linguistics, about what the review had actually engaged and what it had left untouched. The response from the director of the school, Jean-François Le Ny — a cognitive psychologist of real accomplishment and a member of the Parti Communiste Français — was brief and final: Arrêtez avec ça, ça suffit !– Just stop, that's it! No argument was offered. No engagement with the critique was proposed. The matter was closed by administrative decree.

Le Ny's combination of intellectual seriousness and PCF membership, which might seem paradoxical, was in fact historically overdetermined — as Part IV of this essay explains. Chomsky the political figure had achieved, by 1979, an immunity from intellectual criticism on the European academic left that had nothing to do with the merits of his linguistics. He was untouchable because he was politically useful. To criticize his theory of language was received as an act of political disloyalty, and was suppressed on those grounds, with no intellectual justification offered because none was felt to be necessary.

I have thought about that exchange for more than forty years. This essay is, among other things, its delayed answer — the argument that arrêtez avec ça would not permit. It is also a contribution to a broader reckoning with the way in which institutional power, ideological conformity, and the sociology of academic paradigms can combine to insulate a body of work from the scrutiny it deserves. Chomsky's case is not unique. It is exemplary.

The reader will find here a formal accusation: that Chomsky did not read the chapters of Skinner's Verbal Behavior that he purported to review, and that the peer reviewers who passed that review did not read them either. The reader will find a linguistic critique: that Chomsky's Universal Grammar was derived from a sample of languages so narrow and so Europeanized as to constitute, in the precise sense of the term, an act of epistemological colonialism — the more ironic given his lifelong denunciations of political imperialism. And the reader will find an institutional argument: that the dominance of Chomskyan and broadly leftist paradigms in Western universities is not a mystery of intellectual fashion but the predictable long-term consequence of specific decisions made in postwar coalition governments, when communist parties were given education and culture because they could not safely be given anything else.

Arrêtez avec ça, ça suffit ! This essay disagrees.

Berlin, Mai 21 2026

Abstract

Noam Chomsky has occupied a singular position in twentieth-century intellectual life, exerting influence across linguistics, philosophy of language and cognition, and political thought. This essay argues that each of these domains demands fundamental reassessment. In linguistics, Chomsky's 1959 review of B. F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior — the product of twenty years of Skinner's thinking — is shown to be a sustained exercise in misrepresentation built on a failure of the most basic scholarly duty: this essay formally accuses Chomsky of not having read the chapters he purported to review. The argument from silence is conclusive: the chapters on the autoclitic, grammar, syntax, sentence composition, editing, and thinking are not ignorable — any scholar who had read them and disagreed would have said so. Chomsky said nothing. The peer reviewers who approved the piece are charged as accessories to the same negligence. Together they produced a paradigm shift in linguistics on the basis of a review of a book neither had read carefully. Chomsky's theoretical edifice of Generative Grammar is then examined against his own impoverished empirical base — English, Yiddish, and a Modern Hebrew Europeanized by Ben Yehuda's revival and Yiddish substrate influence, while the native VSO structure of Biblical Hebrew remained unknown to him — supplemented by the willful neglect of the cross-linguistic evidence assembled by his own teacher, Edward Sapir, whose fieldwork on Native American languages had demonstrated precisely what Chomsky's theory required him not to see. This parochialism is shown to be not merely a methodological error but an act of epistemological colonialism: the elevation of European syntactic properties to universal status, against which all other grammars are measured as variations or deficiencies — a procedure directly comparable to the political imperialism Chomsky spent his career denouncing. The irony is structural and total. The essay further examines Mandarin Chinese, with its nearly billion native speakers, and the Pirahã language documented by Daniel Everett, both of which violate core Chomskyan universals. It addresses the question of what is genuinely unique to human language, arguing that the answer lies not in recursion or any innate syntactic module but in writing, enabled by the hand — a materialist, embodied account connecting to Leroi-Gourhan's thesis of hand-language co-evolution, to the unresolved semiotic status of co-speech gesture universal in all human speakers, and to the evidence from sign languages that the coupling of hand, face, and voice is neurologically fundamental. Genuine phonological universals, as Roman Jakobson demonstrated, exist — but they are explicable by physical constraint, not Cartesian-Platonist nativism. The third section examines Chomsky's political writings, arguing that they enact precisely the Manichaean propaganda they claim to expose — the beam and the mote of Matthew 7:5 — and documents the further irony that Chomsky, the lifelong denouncer of capitalism, practiced market economics with considerable personal profit, protecting his assets through the very tax instruments he publicly condemned. The essay concludes by situating Chomsky within a broader institutional history: the postwar allocation of education and culture ministries to communist parties across Western Europe, which could not be trusted with finance, interior, defense, or diplomacy, produced a multigenerational academic left whose ideological dominance in the humanities outlasted the political systems it had been used to defend. Communism lost the Cold War everywhere except the universities. Jean-François Le Ny's instruction to cease criticism of Chomsky in a Parisian psychology department in 1979 — offered without argument, by a PCF member, to a student raising legitimate theoretical objections — is a small but precisely documented instance of how that dominance operated.

Part I: The Skinner Review — A Strawman Built on Unread Pages

1.1 Twenty Years of Work, Dismissed in Thirty Pages

B. F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*, published in 1957, was not a hastily assembled provocation. Skinner states in his preface that it took him twenty years to write the book — and the twenty years are visible on every page, not as accumulated obscurity but as accumulated precision. His thinking about verbal behavior had begun in the late 1920s, during his time at Harvard, where he engaged seriously with the philosophy of language, with Wittgenstein, with Russell, and with the problem of meaning. The book that emerged is a 478-page theoretical construction of considerable sophistication, moving from the simplest functional units of speech — the mand, the tact, the echoic — through increasingly complex phenomena: metaphorical extension, multiple causation, the autoclitic, grammar, sentence composition, editing, and finally thinking itself.

Chomsky's 1959 review in *Language* dispatched this work in thirty-three pages. It became one of the most cited documents in the history of linguistics and cognitive science. Generations of students received it as a definitive demolition. Most of them did not read Skinner's book. Had they done so, they would have discovered something remarkable: that Chomsky's most powerful objections targeted positions Skinner had not held, and that the phenomena Chomsky accused Skinner of ignoring were addressed at length in the chapters Chomsky had not read.

1.2 The Formal Accusation

This essay does not suggest, imply, or infer. It accuses.

> **Noam Chomsky did not read the chapters of Verbal Behavior that he purported to review. The charge is supported by an argument from silence that, in this case, is conclusive.**

The second half of *Verbal Behavior* — Chapters 12 through 19, comprising Parts IV and V of the book — addresses, directly, sustained, and at length, the very phenomena Chomsky claimed Skinner had failed to account for. Chapter 12 develops a functional account of grammatical structure through the concept of the autoclitic. Chapter 13 treats grammar and syntax explicitly, over dozens of pages, in Skinner's own words: 'Traditionally these comprise the subject matter of grammar and syntax.' Chapter 14 addresses the composition of novel sentences. Chapter 15 addresses editing — the processes by which speakers select, withhold, and revise verbal material. Chapter 17 addresses the self-strengthening of verbal behavior and the generation of new responses. Chapter 19 addresses thinking and covert verbal behavior, explicitly acknowledging that a purely overt account would leave 'embarrassing gaps' in the analysis.

These chapters are not marginal. They are not footnotes. They are not qualifications buried in appendices. They are the sustained theoretical core of the book's second half, running to hundreds of pages, addressing directly and without ambiguity the questions of grammar,

creativity, novelty, and inner speech that Chomsky declared behaviorism constitutionally incapable of addressing.

A scholar who reads material of this kind and disagrees with it writes a refutation. He identifies the argument, states his objection, and explains why the argument fails. This is what scholarly disagreement looks like. It is what Chomsky himself demanded of others throughout his career.

Chomsky wrote no such refutation. The autoclitic receives a passing dismissive gesture in the review. Chapters 13, 14, 15, 17, and 19 are not mentioned. There is no engagement, no counter-argument, no acknowledgment that Skinner had addressed these topics at all. The silence is total.

This total silence has one explanation. Chomsky did not read these chapters. A scholar who had read them — who had encountered Skinner's explicit, extended treatment of grammar, syntax, sentence composition, and verbal thinking — would have been compelled to engage them. They are too substantial, too directly relevant, too squarely addressed to the questions at issue to be passed over without comment by a serious reviewer. Their absence from the review is not a rhetorical choice. It is the trace of an absent reading.

If anyone wishes to contest this accusation, the path is clear: produce evidence that Chomsky engaged with these chapters — a letter, a note, a later reference, a public acknowledgment of any kind. In sixty-five years of scholarship on this episode, no such evidence has been produced. There is none to produce.

1.3 The Anatomy of a Strawman

Built on this absent reading, the review constructs a strawman of corresponding crudeness. Chomsky attributes to Skinner an atomistic, mechanistic version of stimulus control: the idea that each verbal response is triggered by a discrete environmental stimulus, such that one could identify the stimulus causing a speaker to say ‘I saw a fragile bird on the branch’ rather than ‘I saw a fragile bird in the tree.’ He then demonstrates, with some ease, that this version of stimulus control is inadequate to account for the richness and flexibility of verbal behavior.

The demolition is effective. Its target is not Skinner. Skinner's actual treatment addresses the combination of multiple variables in producing a single verbal response, the role of the speaker's history in determining which aspects of a stimulus acquire control, and the metaphorical and extended uses of verbal responses under conditions of partial or analogical stimulus similarity. None of this appears in Chomsky's characterization. The strawman was not consciously constructed against a known position and then deliberately misrepresented. It was the inevitable product of a reviewer who had not read enough of the book to know what position he was attacking.

A clarification is necessary on Skinner's concept of covert verbal behavior, which appears in Chapter 19 and which Chomsky's review — predictably, given that the chapter was not read — treated as an evasion. Covert behavior is not a fig leaf concealing mental events through behavioral vocabulary. It is behavior that happens to be unobservable by ordinary means but is in principle measurable: subvocal speech, peripheral muscular activity of the lips, tongue, and larynx, and the activity of the middle-ear muscles — the stapedius and tensor

tympani — all of which leave detectable electromyographic and electro-acoustic traces during both waking and sleep (see Preschel op. cit). The covertness is a practical limitation of observation, not an ontological category. Skinner did not smuggle the mind back in through the concept of covert behavior. He extended the same behavioral framework, with the same explanatory logic, to phenomena that occur inside the skin. Chomsky's *"mental organ,"* by contrast, leaves no measurable trace whatsoever — which makes it not a more rigorous account of inner speech but a less rigorous one.

1.4 The Peer Review Indictment

The charge against Chomsky does not stand alone. It implicates the institution that validated his review.

> **The peer reviewers who approved Chomsky's 1959 review for publication in Language are charged as accessories to the same scholarly negligence. They approved a thirty-three page critique of a 478-page book without noticing — or without considering it disqualifying — that the critique ignored the book's entire second half.**

This is not a minor procedural failure. The peer review system exists precisely to catch this kind of error: the misrepresentation of a position, the selective engagement with a text, the construction of a critique that defeats an argument the target did not make. Reviewers with competence in the field and access to Skinner's book had every tool needed to identify what Chomsky's review had omitted. They did not identify it — because, in all probability, they had not read the omitted chapters either.

This is *panurgisme* in its institutional form — what the French, after Rabelais, call the behavior of Panurge's sheep, who follow one another off the cliff not from stupidity alone but from the overwhelming social pressure of conformity. By 1959, the theoretical winds in linguistics were already shifting decisively toward mentalism and away from behaviorism. Chomsky's review arrived at a moment when its conclusions were desired. The reviewers read to confirm, not to check. The result was the consecration of a negligent review as a paradigm-shifting document.

Kenneth MacCorquodale's meticulous 1970 rebuttal in the ***Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*** demonstrated Chomsky's errors point by point, with the textual evidence that the original reviewers should have demanded. It was ignored — and the mechanism of that ignoring deserves to be stated plainly, because it is more damning than any conspiracy could be. *The Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior* was a behaviorist journal, read by behaviorists, cited by behaviorists, and by 1970 behaviorism had already been institutionally expelled from linguistics and cognitive science. A decisive rebuttal published in a journal that the victorious paradigm's practitioners did not read was, for all practical purposes, a rebuttal published nowhere. No suppression was required. Disciplinary segregation accomplished the same result with perfect efficiency.

This is Thomas Kuhn's account of how paradigm shifts actually operate: not by the new paradigm refuting the old one, but by rendering it institutionally invisible — relocating its practitioners to journals, conferences, and departments that the new establishment need never consult. Chomsky's review produced a paradigm shift; MacCorquodale's rebuttal was swallowed by the paradigm it sought to correct. The error has been reproduced in textbook after textbook for sixty-five years, not because anyone decided to reproduce it, but because no one in the mainstream of the field ever had occasion to check.

Part II: Generative Grammar — Cartesian Platonism Meets Empirical Reality

2.1 The Philosophical Foundations: Descartes and Plato in Linguistic Disguise

To understand why Chomsky's linguistic theory takes the form it does, one must understand its philosophical commitments. Chomsky is, explicitly and self-consciously, a Cartesian dualist and a Platonist in the philosophy of language. The concept of Universal Grammar is not, at its foundation, an empirical hypothesis derived from cross-linguistic data; it is a philosophical thesis about the nature of mind, dressed in the language of transformational syntax.

For Chomsky, linguistic knowledge is not acquired from experience but is innate — a pre-given cognitive structure that the child brings to the task of language learning. This structure is, in the relevant sense, Platonic: it exists prior to and independently of any particular language or experience, and it determines the form that any possible human language can take. The poverty of the stimulus argument — the claim that children acquire grammatical knowledge that could not have been derived from the input they receive — is the empirical peg on which this Platonic thesis is hung. But the thesis itself is philosophical before it is empirical.

The Cartesian dimension is equally important. Chomsky explicitly frames his linguistics as a revival of seventeenth-century Cartesian rationalism, particularly the Port-Royal grammarians, against the empiricist tradition of Locke and Hume. Language, for Chomsky, is a window into the innate structure of mind — a mental organ with its own architecture, distinct from general cognition and from any learning mechanism that could apply to other domains. This philosophical positioning has direct consequences for the theory's relationship to evidence: a Platonist hypothesis about the innate structure of the language faculty is not straightforwardly falsifiable by cross-linguistic data, because it can always retreat to more abstract levels of representation. When a language is found that violates a proposed universal, the response is to posit a deeper, more abstract level at which the universal is preserved. This is not science; it is the protection of a philosophical commitment by theoretical insulation.

2.2 European Syntax All the Way Down

Chomsky's empirical base for Universal Grammar has been, throughout his career, strikingly narrow. His primary language of analysis has been English. His secondary languages have been, characteristically, other Germanic languages and Romance languages — languages whose syntactic features he elevated to universal status through phrase structure configurations, transformational rules, and movement operations that are prominent and relatively tractable in the languages he knew best.

He occasionally cited Hebrew as a data point beyond the Germanic core. This citation does not survive scrutiny. The Hebrew Chomsky knew was Modern Hebrew — the revived vernacular constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by

Yiddish-speaking and European immigrants to Palestine under the influence of Eliezer Ben Yehuda's language revival project. Modern Hebrew's dominant word order is Subject-Verb-Object, the order shared by English, German, French, and the other European languages its early speakers brought with them. This SVO order is not a Semitic inheritance. Biblical Hebrew is a Verb-Subject-Object language: 'Bara Elohim et hashamayim v'et ha'aretz' — 'Created God the heavens and the earth' — the opening sentence of Genesis and one of the most widely known sentences in the history of human civilization. Under the pressure of European substrate languages, Modern Hebrew drifted decisively away from this native VSO order. Chomsky had no contact with Biblical Hebrew or with the pre-Ben Yehuda textual tradition in which the language's native syntactic structure is preserved. He was therefore citing, as evidence for universal syntactic structure, a language that had been grammatically Europeanized — without knowing that this was what he was doing. His Hebrew, like his English and his Yiddish, was European syntax. His entire empirical base, including the one language he may have believed gave him reach beyond Germanic, turns out on inspection to be European syntax all the way down.

This failure is made more acute — and more damning — by the intellectual tradition in which Chomsky was formed. He was a disciple of Edward Sapir, one of the founding figures of American structural linguistics, whose life's work was built on the painstaking documentation of the polysynthetic languages of Native North America: Navajo, Nootka, Takelma, Hopi, and dozens of others. These languages have structures so radically different from Indo-European that they demolished, for any scholar who studied them seriously, any naive claim about universal syntactic categories. Sapir drew the lesson explicitly. In ***Language*** (1921) he wrote that 'when it comes to linguistic form, Plato walks with the Macedonian swineherd, Confucius with the head-hunting savage of Assam' — no civilization, no cultural prestige, no European inheritance confers any syntactic privilege. The world's languages are formally diverse in ways that resist any simple universal scheme. This was not a peripheral observation in Sapir's work. It was its central lesson, earned through fieldwork of extraordinary care and depth.

Chomsky inherited this tradition and learned nothing from it — nothing, at least, about linguistic diversity. He took from the structuralist tradition what served him: the commitment to formal rigor, the aspiration to make linguistics a scientific discipline. He discarded what did not serve him: the empirical record of cross-linguistic diversity that the tradition had painstakingly assembled over decades of fieldwork. From the school that had most thoroughly documented the structural variety of human language, Chomsky derived a theory of universal syntactic uniformity. The tradition that should have been his most important empirical constraint became, instead, merely his institutional home.

But the sampling error is not merely a methodological failure. It is also, in the precise sense of the term, an act of epistemological colonialism. When a linguist takes the syntactic properties of European languages — the languages of the colonial powers, the languages of the academies, the languages in which linguistics itself was institutionalized as a discipline — and declares them universal, he performs in the domain of science exactly what colonialism performed in the domain of politics: the elevation of a particular, historically contingent form to the status of the universal norm, against which all other forms are measured and found to be variations, exceptions, or derived imperfections. The colonized

language, in this framework, does not have a different grammar. It has a deficient or peripheral instantiation of the grammar that European languages exemplify most clearly.

The practical consequences of this were real and lasting. The generativist framework, exported globally through American academic dominance in the postwar decades, shaped how linguists across Asia, Africa, the Americas, and the Indian subcontinent were trained to analyze their own languages. Generations of scholars were taught to describe their native tongues using categories — noun phrase, verb phrase, movement, trace, S̄ — derived from the analysis of English, and presented not as hypotheses about English but as the universal grammar that all languages instantiate. This produced systematic distortions in the description of non-European languages and marginalized analytical traditions that had, in some cases, achieved extraordinary formal sophistication entirely independently of the European tradition.

The Sanskrit grammatical tradition is the most striking example. Pāṇini's ***Aṣṭādhyāyī***, composed around the fourth century BCE, is one of the most remarkable intellectual achievements in the history of human thought: a complete, generative, rule-based formal grammar of Sanskrit of extraordinary precision, using a system of meta-rules, operators, and ordered derivations that anticipates, in its own terms, many of the formal insights that twentieth-century generative linguistics claimed as new discoveries. It was produced entirely outside the European tradition, using analytical categories specific to Sanskrit's own structure, without any of the assumptions about subject-predicate logic that European grammar inherited from Aristotle and that Chomsky inherited from the Port-Royal grammarians. A Universal Grammar that cannot accommodate Pāṇini's framework — that treats the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* as a historical curiosity rather than as an alternative formal tradition of equal standing — is not universal. It is parochial with imperial ambitions.

The deepest irony is one that Chomsky, of all people, should have been positioned to see. He has spent fifty years denouncing American imperialism in his political writings — the projection of American power, American values, and American interests onto the rest of the world as if they were universal goods, the refusal to recognize that what presents itself as universal is always the particular interest of the powerful. In his linguistics, across the same fifty years, he projected the syntactic properties of English onto the rest of the world's languages as if they were universal structures inscribed in the human mind. The political anti-imperialist and the linguistic imperialist are the same person. He denounced in the domain of power precisely what he enacted in the domain of knowledge — and showed no awareness of the contradiction. Proust observed that we detest what is akin to ourselves, and that our own flaws, seen from without, exasperate us. Chomsky's lifelong denunciation of imperialism is, in this light, a form of self-portrait.

2.3 Mandarin and the Failure of Syntactic Universalism

Mandarin Chinese is the language with the largest number of native speakers on earth — approximately 920 million to a billion. This distinction matters: English surpasses it in total speakers when second-language users are counted, and Spanish commands a vast global presence, but the sheer number of people for whom Mandarin is the primary language of thought and daily life is sufficient to make the argument that follows decisive. It is an analytic, isolating language with no morphological case-marking, no agreement

morphology between noun and verb, and a fundamental sentence architecture that is topic-prominent rather than subject-prominent. These properties are not superficial variations on a universal deep structure; they represent a genuinely different organization of the sentence.

Topic Prominence and the Myth of Universal Subject-Predicate Structure

Generative Grammar treats the Subject-Predicate structure of the sentence as universal, reflecting the fundamental architecture of the clause in all human languages. Mandarin is organized around the Topic-Comment distinction instead. The topic — which need not be the grammatical subject, the agent, or even an argument of the main verb — is fronted and the comment follows. This structure recurs systematically and is the default, not a marked or derived option.

The generativist response has been to derive topic-prominence from subject-prominence through abstract movement operations, preserving the claim of universal underlying structure. But as the posited abstract structures become increasingly remote from observable data, the empirical content of the universality claim approaches zero. A theory compatible with topic-prominent and subject-prominent surface structures in equal measure, by positing different abstract derivations for each, has ceased to make empirical predictions about surface form.

Serial Verb Constructions and the 'Long Time No See' Illustration

Mandarin makes extensive use of serial verb constructions, in which two or more verbal predicates appear in sequence sharing arguments without any overt coordination or subordination marking. These constructions violate the assumption that a clause is headed by a single predicating verb — an assumption that X̄ theory treats as a universal property of phrase structure.

A small but telling illustration of how differently Chinese sentence architecture operates comes from the English idiom 'long time no see,' now perfectly naturalized in everyday use. It is in fact a calque — a loan translation — from Cantonese, reflecting the structure 好耂冒見 (hou noi mou gin). The construction lacks a verb of seeing in the expected English position, lacks a subject, and places negation in a configuration that violates English phrase structure entirely. The fact that this construction entered English and became idiomatic is evidence of how profoundly different Chinese syntactic organization can be from the European patterns on which generative syntax was modeled.

2.4 The Pirahã Challenge: Recursion and the Unfalsifiable Retreat

In a landmark 2002 paper in Science, Chomsky, Hauser, and Fitch proposed that the single feature distinguishing human language from all animal communication is recursion — the embedding of syntactic structures within structures without limit, generating an infinite set of expressions from finite means. This narrow faculty of language was presented as both the computational core of human language and a species boundary: humans have it, no other animal does.

Daniel Everett's decades of fieldwork with the Pirahã people of the Brazilian Amazon struck at the first half of this claim. Pirahã, he reported, lacks recursive embedding entirely: no

relative clauses, no complement clauses, no sentential embedding of any kind. The language is structurally bounded in ways the 2002 paper had declared impossible for any human language.

The Chomskyan response — published by Nevins, Pesetsky, and Rodrigues in 2009 — argued that Pirahã has recursion at an abstract level, even in the absence of any observable recursive structure. This is precisely the unfalsifiable theoretical insulation described above. If a language can have recursion without any surface manifestation of recursive structure, then the universality claim is compatible with any observable language whatsoever and has ceased to be a scientific claim. The logic is elementary: if recursion is universal, no human language lacks it. Pirahã appears to lack it. Therefore either the universality claim is false, or recursion has been redefined to mean something permanently unobservable. Neither option is comfortable for the Chomskyan program.

2.5 The Species Boundary That Was Not There: Cetacean Communication

The second half of the 2002 claim — that recursion marks a species boundary between human language and all animal communication — faces an empirical challenge of a different kind, one that Chomsky's Cartesian philosophical commitments made it structurally difficult for him to anticipate.

Language is not exclusively human. Cetacean communication research has documented communicative systems of a complexity that cannot be dismissed as mere signal or instinctive vocalization. Orcas possess distinct vocal dialects by pod, transmitted culturally across generations through learning rather than genetic inheritance. Bottlenose dolphins use individual signature whistles that function as names, recognized and responded to by conspecifics even in the absence of the named individual. Sperm whales produce clicking codas that vary systematically by clan across ocean basins, constituting a form of cultural identity expressed through vocal convention. Evidence of combinatorial structure has been documented in multiple cetacean species.

These findings establish that the sharp boundary Chomsky drew between human language and animal communication was drawn in the wrong place, on insufficient evidence, in service of a philosophical prior — the Cartesian requirement that language be a uniquely human, uniquely mental property, separating human beings from the animal-machines of Descartes's universe. The boundary dissolved not because cetaceans turned out to have Merge or recursive embedding, but because the properties Chomsky associated exclusively with human language — cultural transmission, dialectal variation, individual vocal identity, combinatorial structure — turn out to be present in species with brains that are, in some dimensions, more neurologically sophisticated than our own.

The orca and the bottlenose dolphin do not read. They do not write. They leave no inscription. Their communicative complexity, however extraordinary, is locked in the present tense of direct vocal transmission: rich, culturally elaborated, individually differentiated — and gone the moment the sound dissipates in the water. This is not a small thing. It is, as we shall argue, the largest thing.

2.6 The Hand: Where Human Linguistic Uniqueness Actually Resides

If Chomsky asked the wrong question — what makes human language unique? — when the more consequential question is what makes human civilization possible, then the answer points not to an innate syntactic module but to the hand.

The orca has a brain of extraordinary sophistication. The sperm whale has a brain larger than ours by every measure of gross volume, with neurological elaboration in regions associated with social cognition and emotional complexity. What neither has is a hand — specifically, the primate precision grip, the opposition of thumb and fingers that allows the making of fine, durable, repeatable marks on surfaces. It is this anatomical fact, not any property of an internal computational system, that draws the decisive line in the history of language.

Writing is not a transcription of speech. It is a different technology entirely — one that externalizes language from the moment of its production, makes it persistent across time, allows it to travel across space without the presence of the speaker, permits revision, accumulation, and the construction of knowledge structures that no individual brain could hold. Civilization — science, law, philosophy, mathematics, history — is the cumulative product of written language, and written language is the product of the hand.

This argument was anticipated by André Leroi-Gourhan in ***Le geste et la parole*** (1964), which proposed that hand and language co-evolved in hominids — that tool-making and symbolic expression are expressions of the same neurological transformation, rooted in the expansion of the motor cortex and the reorganization of the prefrontal regions that accompanied the freeing of the hand by bipedal locomotion. The hand that knaps flint and the mouth that names things are products of the same evolutionary pressure, and the externalization of language in writing is the culmination of a process that began with the first marked bone and the first shaped stone.

2.7 The Unsolved Problem of Co-Speech Gesture

All human speakers, in all cultures that have been studied, move their hands when they speak. This is universal. The question is whether these movements carry genuine semiotic value — whether they constitute, or participate in, a sign system — or whether they are epiphenomenal accompaniments to speech with no independent communicative function.

The gesture research tradition, associated primarily with David McNeill's ***Hand and Mind*** (1992) and Adam Kendon's typological work, has made progress on classification. McNeill distinguishes iconic gestures, which depict content; metaphoric gestures, which represent abstract structure spatially; deictic gestures, which point; and beats, which mark prosodic structure. What does not yet exist is a rigorous semiotic analysis of co-speech gesture in the Peircean sense: a systematic cross-linguistic and cross-cultural study determining whether spontaneous hand movements during speech constitute a partially autonomous sign system with its own structure, or are entirely parasitic on the spoken channel they accompany. This gap in the literature is significant and unresolved — and one that Chomsky's disembodied mentalism is structurally incapable of asking, since his Cartesian inheritance forbids him from treating the body as constitutively involved in language rather than merely instrumental to it.

2.8 Sign Languages and the Neural Coupling of Hand, Face, and Voice

Sign languages are not purely manual. They involve systematic lip and facial movements integral to their grammar. These are of two distinct types: mouthing — the silent articulation of words from the surrounding spoken language, a contact phenomenon — and mouth morphemes, movements native to the sign language itself, carrying grammatical information such as adverbial or adjectival modification. The existence of mouth morphemes means that even in communities with no exposure to spoken language, the oral-facial apparatus remains grammatically active.

The vocal tract and the hands are not two independent channels that can be freely substituted for one another; they are components of a single, deeply integrated neuromuscular system for language production. Human language, in all its modalities, is produced by a coupled system involving hand, face, and vocal apparatus together — a system whose evolutionary origins are precisely those Leroi-Gourhan described, and whose external product, in the form of writing, is made possible by the hand's unique capacity to leave durable marks. Chomsky's disembodied mentalism cannot see this. His Cartesian inheritance forbids it.

2.9 What Genuine Linguistic Universals Look Like: Jakobson, Zipf, and the Biology of Meaning

Roman Jakobson, in ***La charpente phonique du langage*** and related work, demonstrated the existence of genuine phonological universals: implicational hierarchies among the sounds of the world's languages that hold without exception. If a language has fricatives, it has stops. If it has nasal vowels, it has oral vowels. If it has voiced obstruents, it has voiceless ones. These universals are absolute, not statistical, and they admit of principled explanation through the physical and physiological constraints of the human vocal apparatus, the acoustic properties of speech sounds, and the perceptual requirements of phonemic contrast. They are grounded in the material reality of bodies producing sound in a physical medium.

Zipf's law provides a second and independent set of constraints that genuine linguistic universals must respect. Across all documented languages, word frequency and word length are inversely correlated: the most used words are the shortest. This is not a statistical curiosity but the linguistic expression of what Zipf called the Principle of Least Effort — speakers and listeners optimize for economy, and the forms that survive and spread under conditions of actual use are those that cost least to produce and process. The law holds across languages as typologically distant as Mandarin, English, and Swahili. It holds in professional argots, in children's early vocabulary, and in the command vocabularies that dog trainers use worldwide.

This last instance deserves attention. Dog trainers across the world use German commands — Rauf, Runter, Halt, Komm, Raus, Sitz, Steh — not from cultural preference but because German morphology happens to generate an unusually rich stock of short, hard-consonanted monosyllables that are perceptually salient and cognitively economical. Nobody designed this. Efficiency selected it. But the example points to something deeper

than Zipf alone can explain, which requires Skinner's distinction between *the behavior of the speaker* and the *behavior of the listener*.

Skinner observed in *Verbal Behavior* that these are two fundamentally different types of behavior. The speaker's behavior — producing language, constructing novel utterances, composing sentences — is the more distinctively human side of verbal behavior. The listener's behavior — responding to verbal stimuli, following instructions, reacting to commands — is continuous with animal behavior and is shared with many species. The dog that responds to Sitz is exhibiting listener behavior of exactly the kind Skinner described: a response shaped by the contingent relationship between a verbal stimulus and its consequences. The universality of Zipfian economy in command vocabularies is explained precisely by this: commands are optimized for the listener, and listeners across species share the same basic constraints of auditory salience, perceptual processing, and cognitive economy. Chomsky's idealized speaker-hearer, abstracted from all conditions of actual use, has nothing to say about any of this — because his framework is built entirely around the speaker's generative competence, and treats the listener's behavior as a mirror image of it rather than as a distinct biological phenomenon with its own constraints and its own evolutionary history.

The third layer of constraint concerns meaning itself — and here Pavlov is as instructive as Jakobson or Zipf. Consider the classic example of Pavlov's bell, which signaled food to a dog and caused it to salivate. If the bell is repeatedly rung without food following, or if the dog is no longer hungry, the dog will eventually stop responding. The bell loses its meaning — not because its acoustic properties have changed, but because the contingent relationship between signal and consequence has broken down. The same dynamic governs the metal triangle used on navy ships to signal mealtime, the school bell that signals class transitions, and the words of any living language. Rung randomly and repeatedly without the expected consequence, any signal first produces confusion, then indifference, then extinction.

This is the behavioral account of meaning: meaning is not intrinsic to a signal but is a function of the contingent relationship between the signal and what reliably follows it. It is relational, historical, and subject to extinction. Words and money share this property — both are social conventions whose value depends entirely on collective acceptance and consistent use, and both are subject to inflation and devaluation when the supply of the signal exceeds the demand for what it reliably predicts. The words closest to biological bedrock — the words for pain, water, mother, death — are the most resistant to inflation precisely because the contingency between signal and consequence is reinforced continuously by the conditions of living. The words furthest from that bedrock — the political and ideological abstractions — are the most vulnerable to the inflationary process, because the relationship between signal and consequence is mediated by social convention rather than biology, and social conventions can be stretched indefinitely before they break.

Chomsky's political vocabulary illustrates the process with uncomfortable precision. 'Manufacturing consent,' 'propaganda,' 'imperialism' — deployed across fifty years to describe phenomena ranging from American bombing campaigns to university editorial policies — have undergone exactly the inflationary devaluation that Pavlov's framework predicts. Rung too many times without the specific consequence following, the signals have lost their conditioning power for anyone outside the community in which the original contingency was established. This is not a political observation. It is a behavioral one.

Together, Jakobson, Zipf, Skinner, and Pavlov define what genuine linguistic universals look like: patterns grounded in the material constraints of bodies producing sound, organisms processing information, and social beings communicating under real conditions of time, noise, cognitive load, and contingent consequence. Chomsky's syntactic universals meet none of these criteria. They were derived from an insufficient sample, protected from falsification by theoretical insulation, and grounded in a Cartesian-Platonist philosophy that abstracts the language faculty entirely away from the biology that produces it, the bodies that use it, and the contingencies that give it meaning. The contrast is not between two competing theories of grammar. It is between a linguistics of the real and a linguistics of the ideal.

Part III: The Political Chomsky — Manufacturing the Consent He Claimed to Expose

3.1 The Manichaean Template

Chomsky's political analysis rests on a moral architecture that is, at its core, Manichaean: the world is divided between a constitutive power of evil — the United States and its allies — and the forces arrayed against it, which are assessed by systematically different, and systematically softer, standards. This is not a conclusion derived from a case-by-case examination of the evidence; it is the organizing premise from which specific analyses proceed.

The framework presents itself as a theory: the manufacturing of consent, developed with Edward Herman, according to which the major institutions of American society — government, corporations, and mainstream media — operate together to manage public opinion in the interests of concentrated power, filtering information and manufacturing the consent of a nominally democratic citizenry. The theory is not without insight. Propaganda exists. Institutional pressures on journalism are real. The relationship between media ownership and editorial priorities is worth studying.

But the theory as Chomsky deploys it is self-sealing. American crimes confirm it. American restraint is reinterpreted as strategic self-interest. American institutions are presumptively corrupt. No evidence could, in principle, falsify the framework, because any evidence that appears to contradict it can be attributed to successful propaganda — the very system the framework is designed to expose. This is not analysis; it is a closed hermeneutic circle.

3.2 The Asymmetric Ledger

Cambodia

In After the Cataclysm (1979), co-authored with Herman, Chomsky spent considerable effort questioning the reliability of reports of Khmer Rouge atrocities, casting doubt on refugee testimony, and suggesting that the scale of the massacres had been exaggerated for ideological purposes. The Khmer Rouge was at that moment the enemy of the United States, having come to power in the aftermath of American bombing campaigns and the destabilization of Cambodia. Its crimes were therefore, within the Manichaean template, at minimum partially excused by prior American provocation, and the reports of those crimes were prima facie suspect as American propaganda.

Approximately two million people died — a quarter of Cambodia's population. When the full scale of the genocide became undeniable, Chomsky's subsequent attempts at self-defense — claiming he had merely demanded methodological rigor in assessing atrocity reports — were unconvincing. The same methodological rigor had not been applied to reports of crimes by American-aligned governments. The asymmetry was structural, not accidental.

The Balkans and Kosovo

The Yugoslav wars of the 1990s reveal the same pattern. NATO's intervention in Kosovo was framed by Chomsky primarily as an exercise in imperial aggrandizement, its humanitarian rationale dismissed as a pretext. The documented pattern of Serbian ethnic cleansing received far less attention in his analysis than NATO's motives. The Kosovar Albanian population functioned in his writing largely as a rhetorical counter rather than as the primary subject of moral concern. The disproportion of attention is the tell: Chomsky devoted far more energy to interrogating the motives of a Western military alliance than to documenting the condition of the civilian population whose survival was at stake.

3.3 The Beam and the Mote

Matthew 7:5 stated the central problem with Chomsky's political work with sufficient precision nearly two thousand years before he began writing: *'Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.'* Proust restated it in psychological terms: *we detest what is akin to ourselves, and our own flaws, seen from without, exasperate us.*

Chomsky has made the critique of propaganda the cornerstone of his political identity. He has argued, at length and with genuine analytical skill, that the American media system functions to manufacture consent, to suppress inconvenient information, to frame political reality in ways that serve the interests of power. Yet Chomsky's own political writings are, by any neutral standard, a form of propaganda: selective in their use of evidence, systematically asymmetric in the standards they apply, organized around a prior ideological conclusion that evidence is marshalled to support rather than test. His treatment of Khmer Rouge atrocities was not rigorous skepticism; it was the suppression of inconvenient information. His treatment of the Kosovo intervention was not careful analysis; it was the subordination of civilian suffering to a preferred geopolitical narrative.

He accuses the American media of manufacturing consent for American power; he has spent fifty years manufacturing consent for a world-picture in which American power is the singular source of political evil. The framework that identifies propaganda entirely with the systems of one's adversaries, and remains systematically blind to the propaganda functions of one's own production, is the paradigm case of the beam and the mote. Chomsky does not apply to his own output the methodological standards he demands of others. In his linguistics, at his best, he insisted on rigor. In his politics, consistently, he exempted himself from it.

3.4 Anti-Capitalism as a Profitable Business Model

The beam-and-mote structure of Chomsky's political work extends, with remarkable consistency, from his treatment of propaganda to his treatment of capitalism. The man who has devoted fifty years to denouncing corporate power, the concentration of wealth, and the instruments by which the rich protect their assets from redistribution has, in his private financial life, made energetic use of precisely those instruments.

The specific facts, documented by Peter Schweizer and not denied by Chomsky, are these. With a net worth exceeding two million dollars, Chomsky engaged a tax attorney at Boston's

Palmer and Dodge — a white-shoe firm of the kind he would identify in his political writings as a servant of concentrated wealth — to establish an irrevocable trust, the Diane Chomsky Irrevocable Trust, designed to protect his assets from the estate taxes he publicly champions. The copyright to several of his books, including multiple international editions, was assigned to this trust, transferring future royalties to his children at lower tax rates and extending the period of family control over his intellectual property. He raised his speaking fee from nine thousand to twelve thousand dollars in the weeks immediately following September 11, 2001, when demand for his analysis of American foreign policy spiked — a piece of market timing that the vocabulary of his political writings would call war profiteering. His MIT retirement funds were invested in the TIAA-CREF stock fund, whose portfolio includes oil companies, military contractors, and pharmaceutical corporations — the precise industries he describes as 'private tyrannies.'

When challenged on the trust, Chomsky responded: *'I don't apologize for putting aside money for my children and grandchildren.'* This is an entirely reasonable position. It is the position that any prudent person of means, of any political persuasion, would take. What it is not is the position of a man who has spent fifty years arguing that such instruments are tools of the rich deployed against the common good. Chomsky granted himself the pragmatic excuse — this is how the system works, one must operate within it — that he systematically refuses to extend to the corporations and institutions he denounces. They too operate within the system as they find it. He does not accept that as a defense for them.

He also enforces copyright on his own work with the vigor that he denies, in principle, to pharmaceutical companies protecting their patents. His website carries explicit warnings against reproduction without written permission. His record company, Alternative Tentacles, charges fees for audio downloads of his speeches. The man who argues that intellectual property rights are merely a form of protectionism for the powerful has built a licensing infrastructure around his own intellectual property.

The title of this section names the mechanism precisely. Anti-capitalism is not merely something Chomsky believes; it is what he sells. The speaking fees, the book sales, the licensing agreements, the brand recognition that makes a publisher say "all we have to do is put Chomsky's name on a book and it sells out immediately" — these are not incidental to his anti-capitalism. They are generated by it. The critique of capitalism is the product. The market for that product is global, enthusiastic, and extraordinarily profitable. Chomsky did not merely fail to live consistently with his stated beliefs. He built a business on the gap between them. Most recently, he has objected to artificial intelligence systems training on his work — invoking the intellectual property rights he has described in principle as mere protectionism for the powerful. The instrument changes; the double standard does not.

There is a more coherent position available, and it begins from the same premises Chomsky claims to hold. All knowledge is a social product. We receive it from the civilization that preceded us, transmitted through institutions, books, teachers, and the accumulated labor of countless people whose names we will never know. What any individual contributes is built on foundations they did not lay and could not have laid alone. On this account, knowledge does not belong to its apparent producers in any proprietary sense — it belongs to the society that made it possible. Sharing it freely is not generosity. It is accuracy about where it came from.

3.5 The Moral Pose and Its Uses

What has made Chomsky so influential, despite the analytical failures documented above, is the extraordinary effectiveness of his moral positioning. He writes and speaks as a man who has faced uncomfortable truths that others flinch from, who has paid the price of speaking against power, who stands outside the corrupted system he analyzes. This positioning — the dissident intellectual, the lone truth-teller — has enormous appeal, particularly for university audiences who experience their own dissent as similarly courageous.

The pose is almost entirely theatrical. Chomsky has spent his career at MIT, one of the world's most prestigious and generously funded research universities, with all the institutional protections of academic tenure. His books are published by major presses and translated into dozens of languages. He is, by any measure, a figure of the establishment he claims to critique. More seriously, the moral pose functions to insulate the work from criticism. To question Chomsky's political analysis is, within the culture he has helped create, to reveal oneself as a dupe of the system — an agent of the very propaganda machine whose operations Chomsky has exposed. This pre-emptive delegitimization of dissent is itself a propaganda technique — one that Chomsky, in his theoretical work on manufactured consent, would have no difficulty identifying as such, had he applied that work to himself.

Part IV: Chomsky as Symptom — The Postwar Settlement and the Long Capture of the Academy

4.1 The Ministries That Were Left

The dominance of the left — and specifically of the communist and post-communist left — in Western European universities is not a mystery of intellectual fashion. It is the predictable long-term consequence of a specific set of decisions made in provisional government coalition negotiations between 1944 and 1947, decisions whose educational consequences outlasted by decades the political systems they were designed to manage.

The communist parties of France, Italy, Belgium, and elsewhere emerged from the Second World War and the Resistance with enormous moral capital and substantial electoral strength. They could not be excluded from government without prohibitive political cost. But neither could they be trusted with the ministries that controlled physical force or economic production. They could not be given finance or industry — they would have destroyed the economy. They could not be given the interior ministry — they would have had the means and the networks for a putsch. They could not be given defense, for the same reason. They could not be given diplomacy — it would have been controlled from Moscow.

So what was left? Education and culture. These appeared, to the centrist and center-right parties that dominated the postwar settlements, to be the soft portfolios — important in symbolic terms, harmless in practical ones. The communist parties received them and proceeded to do with them what any disciplined political organization does with institutional power: they staffed them, shaped the curricula, appointed the administrators, built the networks, and trained the next generation in their own image.

The long-term consequences were asymmetric in a way the postwar center-right governments did not anticipate and cannot be said to have chosen. Control of a finance ministry lasts as long as the government that holds it — typically a few years. Control of education lasts a generation, because the students trained under one paradigm become the professors who train the next cohort, who become the administrators who hire the next generation of professors. The communist parties kept the schools and universities for decades. Their successors — the post-1968 left, the post-structuralists, the critical theorists, people who had abandoned orthodox Marxism but retained its political reflexes and its institutional networks — kept them longer still.

Jean-François Le Ny, director of a school of psychology in Paris in 1979, member of the Parti Communiste Français, silencing a student's critique of Chomsky with *Arrêtez avec ça, ça suffit !* (Just stop, that's it) — no argument, no engagement, administrative decree — was not an anomaly. He was the system operating as designed. He occupied his position because the postwar settlement had put people like him in positions like his. He protected Chomsky's theory not because he had examined it and found it sound, but because Chomsky the political figure was an asset of the left that the left's academic administrators were institutionally disposed to protect. The intellectual content of the critique was irrelevant. The political valence of the critic was what mattered.

4.2 Communism Won the Cold War in the Humanities

The Cold War ended in 1989 with the collapse of the Soviet empire. By any reasonable measure, the verdict was decisive: command economies had failed, Leninist-Stalinist political systems had produced poverty and repression on an enormous scale, and the populations of Eastern Europe demonstrated, with remarkable consistency, that they preferred the liberal democratic alternative when given the choice.

In the humanities departments of Western universities, the expected reckoning did not occur. The frameworks developed in the 1960s and 1970s continued largely intact — partly because post-structuralism and deconstruction had already theorized their way out of any commitment to actually existing political programs. By 1989, the fashionable positions were anti-foundationalist in ways that made empirical refutation structurally impossible. The fall of the Berlin Wall cannot refute Derrida, because Derrida's work makes no falsifiable predictions about political outcomes.

But beneath the theoretical sophistication, the political sympathies of the generation of 1968 survived intact: the presumption that Western power is inherently suspect, that American foreign policy is presumptively malign, that capitalism is the source of human suffering, and that the role of the intellectual is to oppose established power rather than to pursue truth wherever it leads. These presumptions became the political air of humanities departments — so pervasive as to be invisible to those who breathe them. In this precise sense, communism won the Cold War in the humanities: not as a governing political program, but as a set of assumptions about power, justice, and the proper orientation of intellectual work that survived the empirical refutation of the political systems those assumptions had been used to defend. Chomsky is their most eloquent and most internationally visible expression.

4.3 The Intellectual Cost of Ideological Monopoly

When a discipline develops a strong prior commitment to a set of political conclusions, the self-correcting mechanisms of scholarly inquiry are systematically impaired. Findings that confirm the preferred narrative are published, cited, and celebrated; findings that complicate it are minimized, ignored, or attributed to bad faith. The peer review system becomes further corrupted when the relevant peers share a strong political prior. The 1959 Chomsky review is an early and symptomatic instance. The reviewers did not catch what any careful reader of Skinner's book would have caught, because they were not reading to check; they were reading to confirm.

This systemic failure has produced a progressive collapse of public trust in academic expertise in the humanities — a collapse that is partly a consequence of the accurate perception that humanistic scholarship too often produces conclusions determined in advance and dressed in the language of rigor after the fact. The academy that was given to the left as a soft portfolio in 1945 has spent eighty years demonstrating that there is no such thing as a soft portfolio. Ideas have consequences. Curricula shape the next generation. The generation trained in one paradigm becomes the institution that enforces it on the next.

4.4 The Solution: Raising the Entry Toll

The reform of the humanities, if it is to be genuine rather than cosmetic, requires what might be called a raising of the entry toll: a fundamental increase in the technical and intellectual prerequisites for serious participation in humanistic inquiry.

The analogy with other disciplines is instructive. One cannot study medicine without mathematics — not because mathematics is intrinsically related to the practice of healing, but because the mathematical training required is a proxy for intellectual discipline: the ability to work within formal constraints, to follow a chain of reasoning whose steps are checkable, to reach conclusions that are not merely persuasive but demonstrably correct. The entry toll filters for a capacity that cannot easily be faked and is genuinely necessary for the work.

The humanities require an analogous filter. The traditional answer — and it was not wrong — was classical languages. A serious student of European history, literature, philosophy, or culture who cannot read Latin and Greek is working at a remove from the primary sources of the tradition, dependent on translations and secondary literature in ways that fundamentally limit the precision and originality of the work. The grammatical and philological training required to read classical texts fluently imposes precisely the kind of formal discipline that humanistic inquiry needs: attention to the exact form of words, sensitivity to register and usage, the patience to work through material whose meaning is not immediately available to an untrained reader.

For those who find the Western classical tradition an insufficient or parochial basis — and there are legitimate scholarly reasons to look beyond it — the alternative is not the absence of classical training but a different classical training: Sanskrit and Classical Arabic for South Asian and Islamic studies; Classical Chinese and Literary Japanese for East Asian studies; Coptic and Classical Ethiopic for African studies. The principle is identical: access to primary sources in their original form, through the philological discipline that such access requires. One can be as rigorous with the ***Mahabharata*** in Sanskrit as with Thucydides in Greek. What cannot be permitted, if the humanities are to recover their function, is the substitution of ideological fluency for philological competence — the ability to deploy the approved theoretical vocabulary in place of the ability to read the primary sources.

What this entry toll would filter out is the ideologically motivated sciolism that has flourished in the absence of technical standards: theoretical work that impresses through verbal sophistication rather than evidential rigor, political commentary that masquerades as scholarship because it is produced in an academic setting by credentialed people, the Chomskyan performance of intellectual authority in the service of predetermined conclusions. Chomsky himself is not a sciolist — he has genuine intellectual gifts and has done genuine work. His failure is not one of ability but of intellectual honesty: the failure to apply to his own work the standards he demands of others, enabled and amplified by an institutional environment that rewarded the performance of dissent and insulated it from correction.

Conclusion: Arrêtez avec ça, ça suffit ! — and Why It Was Not Enough

The title of this conclusion is borrowed from Jean-François Le Ny, who in 1979 offered it as a substitute for argument. It captures, in five words, everything that is wrong with the academic culture this essay has examined: the refusal to engage, the invocation of authority in place of reason, the treatment of intellectual criticism as a form of disorder to be suppressed rather than a contribution to be answered. It is the academic equivalent of the peer reviewers who passed Chomsky's 1959 review without reading the book it purported to critique — the same gesture of dismissal without engagement, operating at a different institutional level.

Noam Chomsky is a figure of genuine intellectual power and genuine intellectual failure. The power is visible in his early contributions to formal syntax: the transformation of grammar into a rigorous discipline, the articulation of deep questions about the biological basis of language, the sustained theoretical ambition of a long career. The failure is visible everywhere else: in the strawman review that demolished a position Skinner had not held, written against chapters Chomsky had not read and approved by peer reviewers who had not read them either; in the syntactic universals that turned out to be the universals of European languages dressed in abstract notation, derived from a sample that excluded the evidence most damaging to the theory; in the species boundary drawn in service of Cartesian philosophical commitments rather than cross-species empirical research; in the political writings that enacted precisely the imperialism and propaganda they claimed to expose; and in the private financial arrangements that enacted precisely the capitalism those writings condemned.

The question of what is genuinely unique to human language has a real answer — but it is not the one Chomsky gave. It is not an innate syntactic module, not recursion, not a computational property of the narrow faculty of language. It is the hand. The orca and the sperm whale have brains of extraordinary sophistication and communicative systems of genuine complexity, culturally transmitted and dialectally differentiated. What they cannot do is write. They cannot inscribe a mark that persists beyond the moment of its making, that travels without its maker, that accumulates across generations into the edifice of civilization. That capacity belongs to the hand — the same hand that Leroi-Gourhan showed co-evolved with language in the hominid line, the same hand whose co-speech movements have not yet received the semiotic analysis they deserve, the same hand that shapes grammar in sign languages whose lip and facial components demonstrate how deeply integrated the body's linguistic systems are.

Chomsky's Cartesianism forbade him from seeing this. For a philosophy that locates the essence of language in a mental organ, the body is merely an interface, the hand merely a tool, the orca merely a machine. The empirical record suggests otherwise.

The institutional history that produced Chomsky's unchecked authority is not a conspiracy. It is something more ordinary and more durable: the consequence of postwar political settlements that placed education in the hands of parties whose interest was ideological reproduction rather than intellectual inquiry, and of academic cultures that mistook the

performance of dissent for the practice of it. Arrêtez avec ça, ça suffit was not an aberration. It was the system speaking in its own voice.

The obligation that remains is the one Chomsky himself articulated and failed to meet: to proportion claims to evidence, to apply standards consistently regardless of the political valence of conclusions, to follow the argument where it leads rather than where it is convenient. These are not new standards. They are the standards of every serious intellectual tradition — from Pāṇini to Sapir to Jakobson to the cetacean researchers who went into the field and listened carefully to what they found. The humanities, if they are to recover their function, will need to recover those standards — and to require them of their most celebrated figures, rather than exempting those figures from scrutiny in proportion to their celebrity. This essay is a small contribution to that recovery. It does not say arrêtez. It says: continue.

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